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# **‘Trying to Say What Was True’: Language, Divinity, Difference in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead***

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Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* is the journal of elderly minister John Ames, written to the seven-year-old son that he knows he will never live to see grow up. Though quite traditional in his conception of God, Ames nevertheless embraces progressive and even atheistic ideas regarding the divine. This article contends that *Gilead* resists being read strictly as an exploration of language’s failure to express the transcendence of divinity, or, conversely, solely as an articulation of language’s cryptic capacity to enact such inability. Instead, it seeks to be read as the confluence of these two approaches. In other words, Robinson’s novel troubles the distinction between language’s ability and inability to express by formulating it as in/expressibility, as the paradoxical simultaneity of the two that makes divinity discernible as difference. This article thus investigates the markedly unorthodox notion of divinity offered in *Gilead* and its broader implications for theological discourse.

KEYWORDS Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, language, divinity, difference

Though all literature can be said to explore the nature and function of language, in that it is constituted by and communicated through it, Marilynne Robinson’s oeuvre offers a distinctive opportunity to investigate and critique language’s ability and/or its inability to express in regard to both human and divine matters. In an interview with Thomas Schaub, Robinson addresses the significance of language to her work, confirming his impression that her ‘idea of a book that [she] want[s] to write [is] one in which language is somehow the center of it.’<sup>1</sup> For Robinson, language is the implicit focus of all of her writings, though rarely its explicit subject, a balance achieved with particular elegance in *Gilead*. A moving collection of thoughts, stories, and hard-earned personal insights, *Gilead* is the journal of John Ames, an elderly Congregationalist minister who is slowly dying of heart failure, written to the future, adult-version of the

seven-year-old son that he knows he will never live to see grow up. In his attempt to 'say what was true,'<sup>2</sup> to write about or fully articulate what he terms 'capital-T truth' (Robinson, *Gilead*, 170.), Ames wrestles with the complexities of language and divinity in an honest, unguarded, and highly personal way. Though on the surface quite traditional in his conception of God (which he envisions as a transcendent Creator who judges sinners and offers eternal salvation), Ames nevertheless embraces progressive and even atheistic ideas regarding the divine, drawing upon thinkers such as Karl Barth (the Swiss Reformed theologian) and Ludwig Feuerbach (the German philosopher). As a consequence of the ostensibly orthodox conception of divinity presented in the novel, scholars of Robinson's work have yet to adequately address the distinctive notion of divinity, inextricable from language, that subtly imbues the text. Ames conceives of writing itself as a sort of communion with God, as that which facilitates and renders perceptible man's proximity to divinity. However, the God Ames intuitively feels in the act of writing is not simply a traditional, transcendent divinity, but rather an enigmatic and elusive one. My contention, then, is that *Gilead* resists being read strictly as an exploration of language's failure to express the transcendence of divinity, or, conversely, solely as an articulation of language's cryptic capacity to enact such inability. Instead, it seeks to be read as the confluence of these two approaches. In other words, Robinson's novel troubles the distinction between language's ability and inability to express by formulating it as in/expressibility, as the paradoxical simultaneity of the two that makes divinity discernible as difference. This article thus investigates the markedly unorthodox notion of divinity offered in *Gilead* and its broader implications for theological discourse.

## Re-examining the Conventional: Unorthodox Theology

In her interview with Robinson, Rebecca M. Painter suggests that there is a 'mystical openness of perspective, a meditative space, created by the parallel accounts of Jack's homecoming in *Gilead* and *Home*,' to which the author replies, 'I think everyone and everything would, seen properly, have a meditative space around them.'<sup>3</sup> This meditative, or contemplative, space that Robinson envisions and subtly accentuates in her writing, offers the opportunity not just for thinking deliberately, but also for thinking differently. As Michael Vander Weele puts it: Robinson's 'voice' operates 'as both an aesthetic and moral category,' giving her readers 'access to a different way of being in, or of apprehending, the world than [they] usually experience.'<sup>4</sup> In the growing critical attention given to Robinson's fiction, this space has been well utilised, with scholars examining her unique reflections upon forgiveness, grace, prodigality, and faith. As such scholarly work attests, her approach to these and other issues often involves the radical re-envisioning of the commonplace and conventional. At times mistakenly portrayed as 'homiletic' and even 'quaint,'<sup>5</sup> particularly in its approach to religion and theology, Robinson's work consistently offers progressive notions that challenge deeply engrained assumptions regarding many of Christianity's most influential figures and principles. However, while scholars have effectively discussed many of these concerns, the distinctive conception of

divinity, as such, that undergirds the entirety of her work has yet to be satisfactorily scrutinised.

A survey of the scholarship dedicated to Robinson's writing reveals universal agreement regarding the significance of theology to her oeuvre. As Jennifer L. Holberg states: 'anyone with even a passing familiarity with Robinson's work knows [...] her project is deeply embedded in a rich Christian theology.'<sup>6</sup> Though it is more explicit in some of her texts than in others, Robinson's interest in spiritual matters remains inseparable from her fictional endeavours.<sup>7</sup> When exploring the theology, or theologies, operative in her work, most scholars use the term in its broad rather than narrow sense, to designate a system of interrelated religious beliefs and concepts, not to describe a focused inquiry into the nature of the divine itself. For example, in his introduction to the Winter 2010 special issue of *Christianity and Literature* devoted entirely to her work, guest editor R. Scott LaMascus extols the 'theological, sociological and historical richness in all Robinson's work,'<sup>8</sup> while Painter maintains that *Gilead* in particular constitutes 'a distinctly American contribution to modern theology.'<sup>9</sup> Employing the term generally, scholars tend to focus on Robinson's reinterpretation of traditional Christian principles and even of the ways in which theology itself can be undertaken. Andrew Brower Latz contends that in demonstrating a 'lived'<sup>10</sup> rather than an 'abstract' (284) theology, 'Robinson's novels are a form of sophisticated and subtle theological reflection, even a model for doing theology, precisely qua novels. [...] They show what theological reflection and belief might mean for a way of life and how they can inform a view of the world' (294). According to Latz, Robinson's fiction performs a theology that is not merely theoretical, but more importantly practical, which he describes as a significant contribution to both literary and religious thought. Disputing such a claim, Christopher Douglas counters that, as a theological model, a novel like *Gilead* is found wanting. He argues that in its 'reluct[ance] to take up questions of doctrine and beliefs,' the novel actually 'dissuade[s]' the reader from 'thinking too closely about Christian ideas or theology.'<sup>11</sup> Douglas's assertion that 'Robinson's Christianity is short on doctrine and long on wonder, mystery, and wisdom' (339), and that this is due to the author's 'opposition to the doctrinal certainty characterising much of the contemporary evangelical and fundamentalist Christian resurgence' (345–46) is a compelling one. However, his lumping together of Robinson with the likes of the late Reverend Jerry Falwell, due to what he describes as their shared investment in a 'historiography [...] as partial and narrow as that to which it is opposed' (Douglas 350), glosses over the novel's nuanced working through of issues like the church's historical complicity in slavery and persistent racism.

While research on Robinson texts is diverse in its investigation of myriad aspects of the author's unique religious vision, it remains rather uniform in its broad use and conception of theology. Scholars seem to toil under the assumption that though her religious beliefs are quite progressive, her conception of the divine remains utterly conventional. By contrast, Robinson herself takes an unconventional and, in a sense, narrower approach to the term, one that focuses more directly on the *theos* fundamental to theology. Speaking with Missy Daniel, she describes theology as 'the level at which the highest inquiry into meaning and ethics and beauty coincides

with the largest scale imagination of the nature of reality itself' (qtd. in Painter 487). Here, Robinson renders with characteristic eloquence the uncertainty, complexity, and magnitude of the concept in her estimation. Theology is no mere catechismal set of morals and principles, but rather a distinct mode and dimension of thought that is at once intensely human and inescapably divine. Profoundly influenced by the writings of John Calvin, Robinson embraces the reformer's view that beauty, in all its manifestations, is necessarily holy. In an interview with Andrew Brown, she expounds further:

One of the things that has really struck me, reading Calvin, is what a strong sense he has that the aesthetic is the signature of the divine. If someone in some sense lives a life that we can perceive as beautiful in its own way, that is something that suggests grace, even if by a strict moral standard ... they might seem to fail. (qtd. in Holberg 284)

For Robinson, as for Calvin before her, theology is a question of aesthetic rather than moral categories. The 'signature of the divine' is not to be found in sanctimony, but rather in the sacred fusion of beauty, singularity, and grace. This unorthodox approach to religion is, as Douglas maintains, 'not so much a matter of claims about the true as it is authentic and incommunicable experience' (346), and, as such, it hints at a unique conception of divinity as well. It is in this sense that Robinson focuses her own theology squarely upon divinity and humankind's participation in it, upon that which the human mind cannot fully imagine and which language cannot adequately articulate.

### Language's Inability to Express Divinity: Transcendence

In *Gilead*, Robinson explicitly explores language's failure to express the transcendence of divinity, to represent what Ames terms 'ultimate things' (178), truths to which man's understanding and words themselves are inadequate.<sup>12</sup> Ames's approach to God and his extended meditation on the nature of language often characterise divinity as that which is 'wholly other,' as that which necessarily exceeds every conception and articulation of it.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the novel, Ames struggles to comprehend the God that he loves but that, he concedes, 'absolutely transcends any understanding I have of Him' (Robinson, *Gilead*, 235). He believes that humans cannot fully grasp the divine due to the 'poverty of our own understanding' (Robinson, *Gilead*, 178), and that to assert otherwise, to 'claim for God a place within our conceptual grasp,' would be 'impertinent' (Robinson, *Gilead*, 179). To profess to 'understand' God is to reduce Him, to diminish Him, to equate Him with that which He is other and greater than. Ames insists,

[God] is One, He is not to be imagined as a thing among things [...]. His name is set apart. It is sacred (which I take to be a reflection of the sacredness of the Word, the creative utterance which is not of a kind with other language) (Robinson, *Gilead*, 138).

He insists upon the fundamental transcendence and irreducibility of the divine. God's transcendence—His status as that which is 'set apart'—constitutes the essence of his sacredness and stands as a mystery of which humans, despite their best efforts, are and will necessarily always be 'outside' (Robinson, *Gilead*, 21).

To reduce God to the entirely comprehensible would be to strip Him of His transcendence and, ultimately, His holiness as well.

Likewise, Ames asserts that the name of God is sacred in that His Word surpasses all words. In this sense, the divine does not simply transcend humanity's ability to understand it, but language's ability to articulate it as well. Language's failure to represent derives from what Betty Mensch conceives as its mediating difference. She asserts, that 'Language, rooted in custom, is in *Gilead* also a sign of separation,'<sup>14</sup> contending that it 'distances people from "direct" access to themselves, to others, or to the world' (Mensch 239). This distancing, or mediation, within language renders it unable to fully express. Likewise, Lisa M. Siefker Bailey argues that Ames is 'keenly aware of the contraries embodied in images and shifts of meaning in words,'<sup>15</sup> of the paradoxical, destabilised, and destabilising nature of language, of its inability to represent and to accurately convey intended meaning. For Robinson, argues Amy Hungerford, 'the effort to order the world through language is subject to radical unlikeness.'<sup>16</sup> Language cannot offer stable delineation or definition, due to the difference within it, which renders signifier and signified radically unlike. Yet, such difference is not 'a problem to be solved but rather the occasion for living a religious life' (Hungerford loc. 2207–208). In other words, it is not sameness and certainty that make possible a life of faith, but rather difference and uncertainty.<sup>17</sup> Ames himself acknowledges he has little, if any, control over the limitless interpretations his words may have for his son. While he maintains that language can at best merely call attention to its own failure to express the divine in words, he also suggests that the transcendence of God's name lends sacredness to 'the Word,' or 'the creative utterance.' Simply put, for Ames, God is holy and thus His name is sacred. Interestingly, he describes this 'creative utterance'—the Word that brought being into being and set it in motion—as a 'reflection' of God's sacredness. He thus implies, by extension, that the space of creativity and the movement of newness, which is inherent to but not 'of a kind' with all language, is in some sense divine. In Robinson's text, the relationship of divinity to language is then one of transcendence, but also, paradoxically, of shared sacredness.

As a minister, Ames is profoundly aware of the imprecision of language, of the difference between words and what they are intended to articulate. He conveys his struggles to express the divine by asserting that 'language isn't sufficient, but for the moment it is the best I can do' (Robinson, *Gilead*, 189). Language's insufficiency and Ames's awareness of it permeates Robinson's novel, threatening his efforts to convey spiritual truths to his son and forcing him to come to grips with a lifetime of sermons that, though well-intentioned, inevitably fell short of their mark.<sup>18</sup> Despite the impossibility of expressing transcendent truths and his own acknowledgement of the necessary failure of the endeavour, Ames is nevertheless irresistibly compelled to try, continuing to preach and to write under what Jacques Derrida might term 'erasure.'<sup>19</sup> Hungerford proposes, 'We might say that John Ames is a character fully imagined to be living within Charles Taylor's secular age: he emerges in *Gilead* as a believer profoundly aware of the possibility—even the plausibility—of unbelief' (loc. 2095–96). She implies that Ames embodies a faith built not on certainty but on an acknowledgment of the reasonability of doubt. For him, the inadequacy of language is not cause for

spiritual doubt or existential despair, but is rather an opportunity to deepen his faith in the enduring nature of truth.<sup>20</sup> He writes to his son, 'It all means more than I can tell you. So you must not judge what I know by what I find words for' (Robinson, *Gilead*, 114). According to Ames, 'ultimate things' inevitably transcend words, and he urges his son not to judge them by his own or language's inability to express them. Later, he continues, 'my failing the truth could have no bearing at all on the Truth itself, which could never conceivably be in any sense dependent on me or on anyone' (Robinson, *Gilead*, 172). Ames insists on the transcendence and independence of divine truth in that man's failure to understand or express it in no way reflects a failure of truth itself. Given their position as 'set apart,' divine truths are beyond our ability to comprehend, to express, and to influence in any way. Thus, he suggests that the transcendence of truth, of divinity, at once guarantees its autonomy and ensures its ineffability, its inability to be fully expressed in words.

### Language's Ability to Enact Divinity: Immanence

Despite the failure of language to entirely express the divine, Robinson's text resists a strictly transcendent approach to it, challenging such a reading by subtly tracing the elusive yet insistent gesture of divinity within all words, which blurs the distinction between the ability and inability of language to express, positing instead its in/expressibility.<sup>21</sup> This approach enables the co-existence of two seemingly contradictory impossibilities: (1) the impossibility of language to express the transcendence of divinity (inexpressibility) and (2) the impossibility of language *not* to enact its immanence (expressibility).<sup>22</sup> Vander Weele discerns a parallel paradox in the movement of language within Robinson's text, proposing that it 'progress[es] both horizontally and vertically at the same time' and, in doing so, guides the reader into 'a new language and a new form of life' (219). His assertion is significant in that it alludes to the contradictory nature of language (i.e., its vertical, or transcendent, orientation—its attempts to represent that which exceeds it—and its horizontal, or immanent, deferral—the gesture of its endlessly open structure) that Robinson's skilful pen makes particularly apparent, and the relationship of that multi-directional movement to newness. Vander Weele describes the poetry of Robinson's language as making singularly audible (making 'overheard' (220) rather than simply heard) a meta-discourse 'addressed [...] to Being, or to self, or to language,' which 'frees us, for a time, from the busyness of transaction, from the language of instrumentality' (220), or, in the words of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, from the 'tyranny of subjective or signifying constellations, under the regime of empty redundancies.'<sup>23</sup> It is through these contradictory impossibilities (i.e., the paradoxical movements of language and its capacity to make audible that which is inaudible) that Robinson complicates Ames's transcendent conception of divinity, tacitly invoking a Deleuzian notion of immanence. In his essay, 'Immanence: A Life,' Deleuze proposes that immanence is not to be thought in relation, as that which is immanent *to* anything, but rather as 'a life' composed of impersonal

singularities, intensities, events.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, the immanence of divinity is enabled by and discernable as difference.

In *Gilead*, Ames himself struggles to comprehend and convey a similar ontological notion by exploring an enigmatic and elusive conception of vitality. He explains,

By 'life' I mean something like 'energy' (as scientists use the word) or 'vitality,' and also something very different. When people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the 'I' whose object can be 'someone' or 'nothing' and it won't really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around 'I' like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. But quick, and avid, and resourceful. To see this aspect of life is a privilege of the ministry which is seldom mentioned. (Robinson, *Gilead*, 44–5)

Ames describes the mysterious life that he perceives around him as akin to light, as a vital luminescence. Christopher Liese asserts that Ames's privileging of the incandescent (at least while he is still clothed in mortality), constitutes a 'spurning [of] the transcendent,' a move that, he insists, 'does not deny the heavenly: it simply leaves the heavenly for its (non-)time and (non-)place.'<sup>25</sup> For Ames, the 'incandescent,' the radiant, bright, or luminous, constitutes a more fitting notion of divinity than the transcendent. Indefinable and intangible, divinity as incandescence, cannot be comprehended or represented, but rather moves as the gesture of difference. More, his use of the word 'presence' here is not meant to imply a static, localised, conventional conception of being, but a dynamic form of being, a flickering and elusive flame that gathers around the candle's wick as its life, but is irreducible to it. This life, he asserts, is beautiful and holy simply for the fact that it exists in itself, apart from someone or something, not a product of subjectivity or individuality but composed of events (in both a conventional and philosophical sense) often marked by grief, guilt, and joy. Elsewhere, Robinson herself echoes Ames's unusual approach to being, writing, 'Almost everything we have a name for exists in the universe of time and matter, and should, so it seems to me, be assumed to share certain of their essential qualities, two of these being ineluctability and profound resistance to definition.'<sup>26</sup> She asserts, paradoxically, that, while there are those things that inescapably *are*, the only 'essential' quality that they share is that they have no essential qualities. In other words, while being is 'ineluctable,' it is also dynamic and indeterminate. Similarly, Vander Weele argues that, in *Gilead*, Robinson often draws upon 'the elemental' (229)—such as water, light, darkness, ash, silence, sorrow, sunshine, and laughter—each of which he describes using Ames's words as 'a thing existing in excess of itself, so to speak' (qtd. in Vander Weele 229). By suggesting that 'the elemental' constitutes and is constituted by its own remainder, Vander Weele implies that being at its most basic form exceeds form itself; in this sense, 'the elemental,' like divine difference, exists not simply *in* surplus but *as* surplus. According to Robinson, such a dynamic mode of being cannot be reduced to the static. In fact, in her essay 'Family,' she decries 'The attempt to impose definition on indeterminacy,' calling it 'the straightest road to mischief,' and one 'very deeply worn, very well traveled to this day' (*The Death of Adam*, 87). Robinson contends that, due to being's indeterminacy and language's inability to represent, one cannot entirely express that which *is*, whether human



or divine, and that to write as if one can is to travel a dangerous road. Thus, the notion of divinity that emerges implicitly throughout *Gilead* is not the product of an effort to define the indefinable, but rather to make it discernible in its own indiscernibility.<sup>27</sup>

For Robinson and Ames, existence cannot simply be reduced to scientifically calculable energy or conventionally ascribed animation, but is rather analogous, in some sense, to an immanent notion of ontology. Language, however, cannot represent this enigmatic and elusive existence, due to the inescapable distance between word and intended meaning—the cause of both its imprecision and undecidability, its error and eloquence—but it must nevertheless endlessly enact this vitality. Language, through its own inability to express, cannot help but express the distance and movement inseparable from it—it must give voice to that which both silences it and enables it to speak, the divine difference in all words.<sup>28</sup> Ames maintains,

People [often use the word ‘just’] when they want to call attention to a thing existing in excess of itself, so to speak, a sort of purity or lavishness, at any rate something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree. So it seems to me at the moment. There is something real signified by that word ‘just’ that proper language won’t acknowledge (Robinson, *Gilead*, 28).

He addresses language’s inability to represent that which exists as more than itself, in excess of itself. He asserts that people attempt to express this enigmatic, yet ‘real,’ life in language, but that their words cannot capture it entirely; instead, they can only ‘call attention’ to it, raising awareness of its gesture. Because there is always more, always surplus, ‘proper’ language (namely, representation) does not and, arguably, cannot take it into account but must perform its own irreconcilable difference. For example, Liese argues that, in recounting the ‘spectacle’ of a beautiful sunset, which to him constitutes ‘God made manifest in this world,’ Ames ‘passes over the opportunity to draw conclusions,’ to engage in an act of ‘intellection or explanation’ (361). Rather, he attempts to ‘re-present’ (Liese 361) not God (an impossible task given His transcendence), but the experience of the sunset and, in doing so, the nature of language. For Ames, the human mind is inadequate to comprehend and language is insufficient to convey God; yet, his attempt to ‘re-present’ the sunset, in the face of inevitable failure, demonstrates an implicit awareness that it is just such a failure that paradoxically succeeds in making evident the divinity within language. Divinity, thought in this way, enables Ames’s own inarticulate articulation, making apparent the very difference that ironically prohibits language’s ability to represent. Furthermore, by describing the enigmatic and excessive ‘life’ that language draws attention to, but cannot capture, as ‘ordinary in kind,’ Ames indicates that everything that *is* shares the same category of being, though it does so at different intensities. Thus, the elusive vitality he perceives in language is not entirely ‘set apart’ or transcendent, but rather is distinguishable only as that which *is* in its immanence. This life then simultaneously surpasses language’s ability to express (it is transcendent) and endlessly moves with all words (it is immanent)—it both cannot and must be expressed.

Ames goes on to connect immanence to a conception of divinity inextricable from language, a conception neglected by scholars of Robinson's work. He offers, 'For me writing has always felt like praying, even when I wasn't writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone' (Robinson, *Gilead*, 19). Ames draws an analogy between writing and prayer due to the feeling of intimacy that he has to 'someone' when engaging in both activities. And, given that he is comparing this experience to prayer, the implication is that the 'someone' he feels that he is 'with' while writing is God. In this sense, language, in general, and writing, in particular, enables an apparent communion with divinity that complicates the notion of God previously alluded to in the novel, as that which transcends all being and all language. Instead, here Ames intimates that this conception of divinity is compatible with and even inseparable from language, that, when writing, we can experience an intimacy with the divinity inherent to it. We do not enter this linguistic domain only when we write, but rather we have a heightened sense of our relationship to it while writing, an added awareness of the liminality of divinity (of the undecidability of movement and space, expressibility and inexpressibility, transcendence and immanence). Laura E. Tanner proposes that Ames's sensitivity to language's liminality is due in part to his own liminality, to the space that he 'cannot fully inhabit' between 'the urgent experience of painful embodiment' (the slow but steady failure of his own earthly body) and 'the psychic negotiation of anticipated absence' (the approaching death of his earthly body and his ascendance to the heavenly realm).<sup>29</sup> She proposes that Ames's position between mortality and eternity—his 'location at the margin between this world and the next' (Tanner 233)—parallels the 'space between perception and representation' (Tanner 228), the divine difference between signified and signifier.

Ames, himself, demonstrates that he is particularly conscious of divinity's relationship to language, the Word's relationship to all words, when he writes:

A good sermon is one side of a passionate conversation. It has to be heard in that way. There are three parties to it, of course, but so are there even to the most private thought—the self that yields the thought, the self that acknowledges and in some way responds to the thought, and the Lord. That is a remarkable thing to consider. I am trying to describe what I have never before attempted to put into words (Robinson, *Gilead*, 45).

Ames insists that there is divinity in all language, whether in thought, speech, or writing, that every word is intimately infused with its gesture. He asserts that, like a three-way conversation, there is always that in language that is divine in its non-semantic excess,<sup>30</sup> its irreducible remainder. Such a notion of divinity subtly implied in the novel undermines strictly transcendent notions of God and the stability and certainty that they empower. In exploring this idea, Mensch describes the 'world' of Robinson's text as one 'of mutual incomprehension' in which Ames 'struggles to communicate' (240) in language that is multiplicitous and rhizomatic, rather than dichotomous and direct. She asserts that, for Ames, 'writing is like prayer, and prayer, [...] like all his communication has a triune dimension' (Mensch 240), is blessed/cursed with a third, *pharmakonic* dimension made legible in its illegibility. This conception of divinity in Robinson's text (which is, importantly, not the only nor even the most apparent conception) can be read as exceeding yet inextricable

from language—moving with every word that is thought, said, or written—and it is thus at once both impossible to express in its transcendence and impossible not to express in its immanence. This paradoxical in/expressibility is not typical of contemporary conservative Christian understandings of the divine, but rather indicates an openness to divinity as enigmatic and endless difference.

Perhaps most effectively, Robinson articulates this complex interpenetration of language and divinity through her use of ash, a symbol that enacts the notion of in/expressibility evident throughout the novel. In *Gilead*, the author first presents the image of ash through the ongoing struggle Ames has with language’s failure to express transcendent truths, a struggle explored in some detail earlier in this article. Again, briefly, despite his best efforts and intentions, he is plagued by the knowledge that his words cannot convey their intended message. During these moments of intense linguistic and self doubt, Ames concedes: ‘my sermon was like ashes on my tongue’ (Robinson, *Gilead*, 21). Deeply troubled by a keen awareness of this inadequacy, he laments the necessary devolution of ‘ultimate things’ into words, which inevitably turn to ashes when spoken. Here, ashes, for Ames, suggest language’s insufficiency, its inability to accurately articulate one’s intended meaning. Ashes are all that endure after truth passes through the fires of signification; they are the inevitable end of the process of linguistic transformation, a process marked by contamination, defilement, and carnality, of shortcoming and failure. Ames asserts that his words, meant to convey divine truths, are instead reduced to ruins, the charred remains of language’s failure to express.

Interestingly, however, Robinson uses Ames’s own father—himself a minister—to provide a very different perspective on ash and, in turn, to complicate the text’s approach to language as well. In the novel, Ames briefly recounts the story of what he considers to be his own first ‘communion’ (Robinson, *Gilead*, 96), taken during the razing of a Baptist church in Gilead that had been hit by lightning and destroyed by the resulting fire. Tired, dirty, and wet, his father, having spent the day labouring in the rain with the other men, salvaging what they could of the church and tearing down the rest, placed in his young son’s mouth a piece of soggy bread. Ames describes this moment: ‘My father brought me some biscuit that had soot on it from his hands. “Never mind,” he said, “there’s nothing cleaner than ash”’ (Robinson, *Gilead*, 95). In stark contrast to Ames’s initial conception of ash as tainted, his father implies that there is innocence, integrity, and even honesty in it. In this sense, Robinson employs ash as a metaphor to indicate that passing through the fires of signification into words themselves does not defile ‘ultimate things,’ but purifies them, preserving the divinity within them rather than incinerating it. For Ames, the biscuit was infused equally with ash as his father’s gesture was infused with divinity. The scene, then, became for him not simply a moment of intimacy with his earthly father, but a moment of communion with his Heavenly Father. The ash did not defile the biscuit, but instead sanctified it, transubstantiating it from bread into the body of Christ. In much the same way, Robinson suggests that beyond simply failing to express transcendent truths, the metaphorical flames of signification make apparent the divinity in all language. While inadequate to represent transcendence, words cannot help but enact the immanence of divinity, expressing it through the gesture of difference

within language. As a metaphor for language, ash articulates not only its inability to express the transcendence of divinity, but also the immanence of divinity that is inextricable from it. In this way, *Gilead* frustrates conceptions of divinity as either exclusively transcendent or immanent by enigmatically enacting the interpenetration of the two through the paradoxical in/expressibility of divine difference.

## Language, Newness, Divinity: A Conclusion

For Robinson, such in/expressibility defies representation and allows for eloquence, and, in doing so, is tied to the notion of newness. Her interest in language, evident throughout her oeuvre, centres on its complexity and its boundless potential for creativity. In the bluntly titled ‘Language is Smarter Than We Are,’ she proposes that, when faced with the incomprehensible—that which causes ‘the cartography of our understanding [to] fray’ (Robinson, ‘About Books,’ n.p.)—we must

develop language that will acknowledge that it does fray, and where it does, and that those things we do not understand are not mere gaps to be closed by extension of existing ways of thinking, but are like sphinxes, riddles, their solutions likely to be astonishing and full of implication (Robinson, ‘About Books,’ n.p.).

When confronted with the inscrutable (such as divinity), Robinson explicitly calls for the invention of new language, language that accounts for our weaknesses as well as its own, that enables us to approach the unfathomable, not as a mystery to be solved by readymade modes of thought, but as a space, an opening, for thinking and creating the unforeseeably new. Rather than attempting to simplify or clarify language, she proposes its ‘remystification’ (Robinson, ‘About Books,’ n.p.), a full acknowledgement and enthusiastic embrace of its paradoxical nature and generative capabilities. ‘Fond of quibbles and indifferent to truths,’ language, for Robinson, is ‘at least as problematic as it is useful’ (‘About Books,’ n.p.), and, as such, full of countless possibilities, each with the potential to free us from the status quo. She asserts that language’s supposed shortcomings, its presumed imperfections, are ‘like a door opening to effect a great liberation’ (Robinson, ‘About Books,’ n.p.). Ironically, she argues that language’s capacity to liberate arises precisely from its fallibility rather than any sort of flawlessness.

In a different context, Robinson develops this notion further, proposing that ‘one of the poignant and powerful things about Scripture [is] that it situates the testimony of the sacred in fallible human voices—which are only extraordinary, only more beautiful, because you sense the frailty. The frailty is insisted upon’ (qtd. in Holberg 284–85). She contends that our incapacity to comprehend divinity makes our attempts at articulating it in language paradoxically ‘poignant’ and ‘only more beautiful.’ Explicitly intended to convey the divine, Scripture necessarily relies upon both humans and language. This reliance facilitates, through the fallibility of each, not a representation but rather an enactment of divinity. In this sense, Robinson’s work fosters the notion that language, at once flawed as a vehicle for ‘ultimate things’ (in Ames’s words) and free from imposed limitations of supposedly stable meaning, makes apparent, through its very frailty—through its in/

expressibility—a unique conception of divinity. *Gilead* thus offers a vision of theological discourse not as inherently teleological (not as offering conclusions or, more precisely, assuming their *a priori* existence), but rather as quasi-transcendental (as rigorously maintaining an openness to the endlessly to come). Conceived in this way, theology is an effort to question orthodoxy, not to perpetuate it, to produce thought rather than to render it unnecessary. Such a conception permeates the novel, challenging the supposedly stable foundations of certainty, truth, and logocentrism upon which contemporary conservative Christianity and its conceptions of divinity are often built.

In her recent non-fiction, Robinson vigorously opposes the contemporary prejudice that 'Western religion was modelled on a pagan conception of God as "motionless," until postmodern hermeneutics intervened,'<sup>31</sup> arguing instead that 'From antiquity, insistence on the ontological unlike-ness of God to the categories to which the human mind has recourse is at the center of theological reflection' (*Absence of Mind* loc. 190–92). She asserts that Christianity did not develop from a conception of the divine as inert and immutable, but rather that in this Western tradition, with its 'vast and unconsulted literature of religious thought and testimony' (Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, loc. 290–91), difference, or 'ontological unlike-ness,' has long been considered inherent to divinity. She maintains that this extensive theological history of divine difference constitutes an 'old and very rich conversation' (Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, loc. 300–308), though, unfortunately, it is almost entirely absent from discussions of theology and religion in America today. According to Robinson, through 'ill-formed nostalgias'<sup>32</sup> born mainly from an insufficiently nuanced conception of history, fundamentalist strains of Christianity are now widely considered to be the bastion of America's 'old-time religion' (*When I Was a Child* loc. 100–102). By contrast, she proposes that a true return to the country's theological roots would reveal not an unwavering certainty in a narrow set of national values and a hostility to reform characteristic of today's conservatism, but rather 'a recurrent, passionate insistence on bounty or liberality, mercy and liberality, on being kind and liberal, liberal and bountiful, and enjoying the great blessings God has promised to liberality to the poor' (Robinson, *When I Was a Child*, loc. 1232–35). This notion of theological difference and the uncertainty concomitant with it has been neglected, till now, in the scholarship dedicated to Robinson's own fiction as well, an omission that allows the unique notion of divinity discernible in *Gilead* to be reduced to and unjustly entangled with the very forms of Christianity that it implicitly critiques.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Schaub, 'An Interview with Marilynne Robinson,' *Contemporary Literature* 35:2 (1994): 235.

<sup>2</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca M. Painter, 'Further Thoughts on A Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, On

Loneliness and Grace: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson,' *Christianity and Literature* 58:3 (2009): 488.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Vander Weele, 'Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange,' *Christianity and Literature* 59:2 (2010): 234.

- <sup>5</sup> Thomas Meaney, 'In God's Creation,' review of *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson. *Commentary*, 'Books in Review' (June 2005): 83.
- <sup>6</sup> Jennifer L. Holberg, "'The Courage to See It': Toward an Understanding of Glory,' *Christianity and Literature* 59:2 (2010): 283.
- <sup>7</sup> Though Robinson has written many essays addressing a variety of theological issues, Amy Hungerford asserts that the author 'presents her most nuanced considerations [...] of religious life in fiction' (Hungerford loc. 2406–407).
- <sup>8</sup> R. Scott LaMascus, 'Toward a Dialogue on Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*,' *Christianity and Literature* 59:2 (2010): 199.
- <sup>9</sup> Rebecca M. Painter, 'Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction,' *Christianity and Literature* 59:2 (2010): 325.
- <sup>10</sup> Andrew Brower Latz, 'Creation in the Fiction of Marilynne Robinson,' *Literature & Theology* 25:3 (2011): 285.
- <sup>11</sup> Christopher Douglas, 'Christian Multiculturalism and Unlearned History in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*,' *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 44:3 (2011): 345.
- <sup>12</sup> Kristin King maintains that, for Robinson, language necessarily bears with, or within, it 'the specter of [...] unfaithfulness to the re-presentation of origins,' contending that words are haunted by their own inability to fully express or to faithfully re-present (King 567).
- <sup>13</sup> Amy Hungerford contends that Robinson 'espouse[s], and write[s] about, belief that is anything but contentless' (Hungerford loc. 1986–90), arguing that her belief is not a 'faith in faith' (Hungerford loc. 514–17), like that which she argues constitutes 'postmodern theology,' but a faith in a positive, ontotheological God. She is, in this sense, 'an avowed and outspoken proponent of mainline liberal Protestantism' (Hungerford loc. 2052–53). While such a description is to some extent accurate, I argue that Robinson's unique articulation of faith itself in her fiction nevertheless makes apparent a notion of divine difference.
- <sup>14</sup> Betty Mensch, 'Jonathan Edwards, *Gilead*, and the Problem of "Tradition",' review of *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, by George M. Marsden, and *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson, *Journal of Law & Religion* 31:2 (2005–2006): 239.
- <sup>15</sup> Lisa M. Siefker Bailey, 'Fraught with Fire: Race and Theology in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*,' *Christianity and Literature* 59:2 (2010): 266.
- <sup>16</sup> Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Kindle edition. Loc. 2107.
- <sup>17</sup> In the epigraph to her article on grace in Robinson's fiction, Painter quotes the author concerning religious certainty: 'There is something about certainty that makes Christianity unchristian ... I have cultivated uncertainty, which I consider a form of reverence' (Painter 321).
- <sup>18</sup> Robinson herself articulates a clear conception of language's failure to represent, not only in *Gilead* and her other novels, but in her diverse scholarly works as well. For example, in an interview with Schaub, she states that her interest in transcendentalist writers, such as Emerson, is born in part from their attempts to draw upon 'all the resources of language as a method of comprehension on the largest scale,' while 'absolutely insisting that [it] is not an appropriate tool' (qtd. in Schaub 241). This paradoxical tension between language's inability to express and its necessity infuses *Gilead* and offers a notion of divinity as difference.
- <sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 60.
- <sup>20</sup> King notes a similar paradox underlying Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*, of a quest for 'wholeness' through the inherently open or incomplete structure of language, which she terms a 'narrative of desire' (King 566). According to King, this 'narrative' leads to a 'liberating flux,' a liminal space or play in language that frees it and, by extension, humanity from the static nature of representational thought (King 566).
- <sup>21</sup> Hungerford proposes that 'What one observer might see as the gap in a person's logic [between 'the notion of freely chosen belief' and 'the modes of submission and mediation this version of Christianity embraces'], then, I see as a whole world of belief, belief in the nonsemantic powers of language. This is a world where religion and literature collaborate' (Hungerford loc. 172–78). She proposes that the ambiguity implied by the apparent paradoxes of Western religions, constitute a 'nonsemantic,' or textual, power in which one can place one's faith. While I agree in some sense, I propose that the nonsemantic powers of language are not the objects of belief, but rather that which, by ensuring ambiguity or uncertainty, makes genuine belief, or faith, possible. To be clear, this belief is genuine not due to the verifiable

authenticity of its object, but rather in the sense that it is entirely distinct from certainty.

<sup>22</sup> James Woods proposes that, for Robinson, 'silence is itself a quality' and that in her novel, 'the space around words may be full of noises,' suggesting that the openings in and around Robinson's language are not fruitless or empty, but are instead clamouring with creativity and consequence (Woods n.p.).

<sup>23</sup> Mensch notes that, according to the Bible, the town of Gilead itself has paradoxical connotations, as at once a 'source of refuge' and an 'object of prophetic condemnation,' (see Jeremiah 46:11–12, among others) (Mensch 237). Thus it seems that Gilead the town and *Gilead* the novel can both be thought to have complex and contradictory natures, *pharmakonic* structures, at once positive and negative, remedy and poison. Derrida employs the *pharmakon* to describe, amongst other notions, the double bind of language, whose inability to represent is simultaneously its capacity to express.

<sup>24</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 265.

<sup>25</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'Immanence: A Life,' in *Two Regimes of Madness* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007), 392.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Liese, "That Little Incandescence": Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, *Studies in the Novel* 41:3 (2009): 362.

<sup>27</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 76.

<sup>28</sup> In 'Darwinism,' Robinson briefly describes her conception of the divine, one drawn directly from the creation narrative of Genesis, as 'in no sense limited or local,' implying a dynamic, rather than stable, notion of divinity (Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 38). Liese observes a similarly destabilising gesture in *Gilead*, drawing a parallel between Mark C. Taylor's project in *After God*, in which he thinks religion 'not as a stable entity at all but

one that is fluid and—quite the opposite—actively destabilising,' and Robinson's effort to read the Puritan tradition 'against itself' (Liese 350). He argues that, in *Gilead*, the author thinks religion as 'subject to the feedback loops and modifications of all systems' (Liese 350), providing an opening in which the incomprehensible paradoxes of divinity are made legible. Robinson's innovative and complex approach to theology, texts, and language reveal all three to be, in Liese's words, 'dynamic, not static,' subverting our conventional notions of them and opening them to re-thinking and renewal (Liese 351).

<sup>29</sup> Likewise, King asserts that Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* operates on two levels, one linguistic and one semiotic, invested as much in 'the spaces between' words, or the difference inherent to them, as how they are used and what they can do (King 569). These spaces between and within words simultaneously demonstrate language's inability to represent—what King terms 'the powerlessness of language to recover presences' (King 569)—and 'affirm multiplicity and indeterminacy' (King 570). Thus, Robinson's interest in the spaces between words should not be read as a critique of the shortcomings of language, but rather an affirmation of its complex and indeterminate nature, of its manifold meanings and its open structure.

<sup>30</sup> Laura E. Tanner, "'Looking Back From the Grave": Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*,' *Contemporary Literature* 48:2 (2007): 227.

<sup>31</sup> According to Hungerford, 'nonsemantic aspects of language' are those aspects that remain 'distinct from and sometimes other to meaning,' that cannot be reduced to linguistic denotation (Hungerford loc. 131–32).

<sup>32</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), Kindle edition, Loc. 182–85.

<sup>33</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), Kindle edition, Loc. 100–102.